"A Woman Dressed like a Man"
Gender Trouble at the Sapphic Cabaret, Paris, 1930–1960

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ABSTRACT Sapphic cabarets where women "dressed like men" figure among the most widely publicized symbols of lesbian desire. During the 1930s more than twenty such cabarets opened throughout the city of Paris. Many of these survived the war and operated into the 1960s and after. This article examines the unique figure of the *entraîneuse*, a female staff member paid to cross-dress who worked in these venues. It argues that this commercial figure played a special role in promoting a sexual schema—now called "butch/femme"—that is usually explained either as biologically determined or as an erotic choice. The gender performances fostered in the Sapphic cabaret enabled the formation of a female same-sex subculture while at the same time making what was then perceived as a contagious threat—the "mannish lesbian"—instantly recognizable and thus more easily subject to surveillance and control.

KEYWORDS sexuality, gender, cabaret, lesbian, Paris

If you happened upon a certain doorway at 60 Boulevard Edgar Quinet in Montparnasse on an autumn evening in 1932, you would have found yourself at Le Monocle, a Parisian nightclub that became one of the most celebrated Sapphic cabarets in France. Situated opposite the swanky Le Sphinx bordello, it was easy to locate. In the early days an awning over the entry spelled out "Le Monocle" in bold script. The club was also listed in the local papers: "A cabaret of a very special kind, in which the clientele is composed exclusively of priestesses from Lesbos, has just opened in Montparnasse," announced the racy society rag, *La vie parisienne* in September 1932.[1] Shortly thereafter, the French Cuban writer Anaïs Nin visited Le Monocle and reports seeing "a woman dressed like a man who attracted me." "I thought a lot about her today," Nin muses, adding, "and I want to see her again."[2] The woman was none other than "Frede"—the same

1. *La vie parisienne*, "On dit, on dit." All translations are my own unless otherwise cited.
2. Nin, *Fire*, 181–82.

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Frede who by the 1950s was running her own Parisian cabaret, Le Carroll's Club, and who was described in the international press as "the most famous lesbian in the world."[3]

Anaïs Nin's comment, "I saw a woman dressed like a man who attracted me"—which expresses a vision of Sapphic desire informed by the sartorial expression of female masculinity—speaks to the historical construction of a stylized sexual subculture peopled by pairs composed of one masculine and one feminine woman. This subcultural system is now commonly referred to in English as "butch/femme."[4] Regardless of national context, explanations for how this same-sex binary came to flourish in the mid-twentieth-century West tend to fall into one of two camps: either this gendered organization of female same-sex behavior is thought to be biologically determined (the sexological perspective), or it is seen as an erotic choice.[5] By examining the gendered performances that took place in Parisian cabarets from the 1930s through the 1960s, this article tells a different story.

Cabarets where women "dressed like men" figure among the most popular symbols of lesbian desire.[6] Run exclusively by and catering to women who loved women, such spaces—expediently referred to here as "Sapphic cabarets"—proliferated across Western Europe in the interwar era. French venues have long had a particular cachet.[7] Although less widespread than in Berlin (which boasted some fifty clubs and cabarets for women at this time), during the 1930s at least twenty Sapphic cabarets opened throughout Paris and its environs.[8] Since

3. Unidentified press clipping in English, dated 1954. Papers of Miki Leff (Frede's life partner), private collection of Roy Winnick, Princeton, NJ. Hereafter cited as Miki Leff Papers.

4. On the importing of the Anglo-American "butch/femme" (or "butch/fem") into the French context, see Lemoine and Renard, *Attirances*. Lemoine and Renard employ *fem* in their work to distinguish the term from the French word *femme*, meaning "woman" and "wife."

5. On the history of the rise of butch/femme in the United States, see Kennedy and Davis, *Boots of Leather*. For Britain, see Jennings, *Tomboys and Bachelor Girls*. For Germany, see Sutton, *Masculine Woman*. For France, see Dean, *Frail Social Body*.

6. Prior to the opening of Sapphic cabarets in the 1930s, overtly masculine women were rarely depicted in the French mass media. Florence Tamagne contends that such women first became common figures of social satire and political critique after the 1922 publication of Victor Margueritte's *La garçonne* ("Caricatures homophobes," 44). Kelly Hankin reviews the extensive literature on the lesbian bar in *Girls in the Back Room*, xii–xiii.

7. The bar scene in Radclyffe Hall's *Well of Loneliness* is set not in London but in Paris. Earlier French literary representations of lesbian bars can be found in Guy de Maupassant's "Paul's Mistress" (1881) and Emile Zola's *Nana* (1880). Both Colette's *The Pure and the Impure* (first published as *Ces plaisirs . . .* in 1932) and Françoise Mallet-Joris's *Le remparts des béguines* (1951) describe French Sapphic cabarets. French filmic depictions of Sapphic cabarets appear in all three versions of *La garçonne* (1923, 1936, 1957) as well as *Simone Barbès ou la vertu* (1979) and *Gigola* (2010).

8. I count as Sapphic cabarets both venues known as *cabarets féminins*, which explicitly courted a female clientele, and those called *cabarets artistiques*, many of which were run by and welcoming of women who desired women but also appealed to mixed-gender audiences. The *cabaret féminin* Le Fétiche opened in 1926. The Sapphic cabarets opened in the 1930s included Le Monocle (1932), L'Auberge du Perroquet Gris (in

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lesbianism, while socially censured, was not illegal in France in the 1930s, many of these venues were explicitly advertised as *cabarets féminins*. They joined extant mixed-gender spaces where female couples were welcome (like Le Liberty's, Le Bœuf sur le Toit, or the Bal de la Montaigne Sainte-Geneviève) and served a female public that was far more economically and racially diverse than that found in the Left Bank salons frequented by the expatriate elite who have heretofore dominated the historiography on female homosexuality in France.[9] Many of these cabarets outlasted the war; their presence into the 1960s reveals a previously unknown world of Sapphic sociability that remained surprisingly active during years renowned for their heteronormativity and homophobia.[10] Indeed, despite the lasting impact of the Vichy regime's August 6, 1942, decree discriminating against homosexuality, and its antifeminist reinstantiation of gender norms, many Sapphic cabarets opened in Paris in the 1930s endured as sites of nonnormative communal and cultural continuity well into the post–World War II period.[11]

By providing same-sex female desire with a new public arena, the Sapphic cabaret paradoxically made the *femme masculine* (sometimes referred to in French as a *Jules*) and her feminine counterpart (sometimes called a *nana*) increasingly visible at the very moment when interwar social anxieties about the

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Vaucresson, 1932), La Vie Parisienne (1933), Le Pavillion de Mystère (1933, in Argenteuil), Le Buenos-Ayres (1933), Le Joubertin (1933), Juan-les-Pins (1934), Le Gibus (1934), Les Cocottes (1935), La Roulotte (1935), Chez Sidonie Baba (1936), Le Siroco (1937), Le Capricorne (established as Chez Agnès Capri and also known as Le Petit Théâtre de la Nuit, 1938), La Silhouette (1938), Les Claudines (1938), Club Liegois, Chez Rylls (1938), Chez Jane Stick (1939), A l'Heureuse Galère (1939), L'Entre Nous (1939), La Sirène (1939), and Le Chez Nous, Chez Magdeleine Barry, and Le Petit Cabaret "Chez Jacqueline Billat" (all 1930s). Seven of these venues lasted through at least the 1950s, and they were joined by others that opened after the war. On the French Sapphic cabarets, see my forthcoming book on lesbian life in modern France. On Berlin's women's cabarets and clubs, see Roellig, *Berlins lesbische Frauen*. Thanks to Laurie Marhoefer for this reference.

9. On these influential expats, who included Natalie Barney, Renée Vivien, and Gertrude Stein, see Benstock's monumental, *Women of the Left Bank*. See also Weiss, *Paris Was a Woman*. One of the few works that discusses *French* women's contributions to this interwar history is Latimer, *Women Together/Women Apart*.

10. Marie-Jo Bonnet, Claudie Lesselier, and Florence Tamagne all maintain that World War II destroyed what had been a vibrant lesbian community in France. See Bonnet, *Les relations amoureuses*, 339; Lesselier, "Aspects de l'éxperience lesbienne"; Lesselier, "Silenced Resistances," 106; and Tamagne, *History of Homosexuality*, 2:271. Elsewhere Tamagne claims continuities in pre- and postwar (male) homosexual bar culture, but she still insists that lesbians "rarely visited bars" ("Paris," 243). My research reveals that while a few Sapphic cabarets (like La Silhouette) closed in 1939, many others (including La Vie Parisienne and Chez Jane Stick) remained open throughout the war, and still others (like Le Monocle) reopened after a brief closure.

11. The Vichy measure against pederasty and lesbianism concerned sexual acts with or between minors under twenty-one. Such acts were subject to a prison sentence and/or fine. The age of consent for heterosexual acts was thirteen in 1942. The law was retained by de Gaulle's post-Liberation administration after the war as Article 331. See Copley, *Sexual Moralities*, 203–4. The passage on July 18, 1960, of the Mirguet amendment, naming homosexuality a "social plague" and increasing penalties for public indecency when related to same-sex behavior, further supported these measures. On Vichy gender policies as a response to the post–World War I emergence of what Mary Louise Roberts has called "a civilization without sexes," see Muel-Dreyfus, *Vichy and the Eternal Feminine*; and Pollard, *Reign of Virtue*. See also Roberts, *Civilization without Sexes*.

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erasure of sexual difference were on the rise.[12] And by rendering strangers recognizable to one another as members of a subordinate group who were united specifically (and sometimes only) by their common interest in those of their own sex, these cabarets helped expand an incipient lesbian subculture. Nineteenth-century cafés and brasseries had catered to such women, but Sapphic cabarets were unique in how they exploited "butch/femme" performances for profit.[13] To explore that commercial staging and analyze its effects, this article draws on memoirs, the mass press, investigative journalism, city records, police archives, television broadcasts, and oral history interviews filmed with eighty-two French women born between 1924 and 1960 in France and its former colonies.[14] I ask: How did the Sapphic cabaret influence how women interested in other women came to learn about, interpret, and express their "different" desires in France between 1930 and the 1960s? What role did the promotion of specific forms of gender performance play in structuring these developments?

To pose these questions is neither to presume that the individuals who peopled these spaces necessarily perceived themselves as having sexual identities, nor to argue for the stability of identity categories more broadly. Indeed, I am less interested in writing what Daniel Boyarin and Elizabeth Castelli have called "a history of a something" (in my case "butch/femme") than in speculating about what is at stake in assigning sexual categories at particular historical moments.[15] While I concede that to name the world is also to transform it, for pragmatic reasons I employ (in English translation) terminology common in my sources—*homosexual*, *Sapphist*, *lesbian*, or *follower of Lesbos*—to refer to women who desire other women, while cognizant that many of the women these sources discuss did not think of themselves in these terms.[16] I use *female* and *woman* to designate individuals conventionally identified as such according to historically operative understandings of gender and sex as binary categories (female/male, woman/man), binaries that the very idea of "gender inversion" reinforced. At

12. According to Carolyn J. Dean, in France "the lesbian" was not considered difficult to identify in the late nineteenth century despite being contradictorily explained as "*both* a manly woman and the womanliest woman." However, Dean maintains that by the interwar period the dissolution of gender boundaries blurred the lines between lesbians and other women, rendering the former less visible and hence more threatening (*Frail Social Body*, 187). In contrast, I claim that the promotion of the butch/femme dyad within the Sapphic cabaret in the 1930s helped consolidate "lesbian" identity and in so doing made women who desired women (whether masculine or feminine) more visible to both queer and heterosexual publics.

13. On lesbian cafés, restaurants, and brasseries in fin de siècle Paris, see Choquette, "Beyond the Myth."

14. On the methodological challenges of using oral history to reconstruct the sexual past, see the preface to my forthcoming book on lesbian life in modern France. For a brief overview, see also Jennings, *Unnamed desires*, xviii–xxii.

15. The phrase is from Boyarin and Castelli, "Introduction," 363, as quoted in Najmabadi, "Beyond the Americas," 17.

16. The terms *lesbien* and *lesbiennisme*, as well as *sapphiste* and *tribade*, were frequent in French elite and popular discourses after 1880. See Albert, *Saphisme et decadence*; and Schultz, *Sapphic Fathers*.

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the same time, I remain aware that as gender outlaws who might have identified today as trans (or, to quote J. Jack Halberstam, "trans*") some of these people may not have seen themselves as "women" at all.[17] And I call female same-sex couples composed of one feminine and one masculine woman "butch/femme" even though that English expression was a later descriptor for performative practices similar to those described here.

Historians of sexuality commonly assert that when "the homosexual" was first described in Western science and medicine in the nineteenth century, this individual was understood primarily as a gender invert.[18] The belief that active sexuality is a male attribute was so dominant in Western culture that eroticism between women was simply unthinkable: to pursue a woman one needed to "be" a man. The idea that the female homosexual was a man trapped in a woman's body was born of this belief.[19] "True" lesbians presented as masculine and were biological anomalies. The feminine women who slept with these women were not *necessarily* themselves lesbians; they were either hypersexual, morally weak, or driven by greed. Historians have claimed, however, that during the twentieth century the argument for homosexuality as gender inversion was gradually effaced by a focus on the gender of the object of desire.[20] Here lust for another person of the same sex trumped inversion as an explanation for homosexual behavior.

I argue that the Sapphic cabaret played an important role in promoting this paradigmatic shift.[21] If at the start of the 1930s female cabaret managers, their staff, and much of their public suspected masculine women of lesbianism, they also understood *all* women as susceptible to same-sex seduction. The performances that took place within the Sapphic cabaret nonetheless marketed an influential image of "the lesbian" as *either* the *masculine or* the *feminine half*

17. Whereas *trans* generally refers to transgender or transsexual people, the asterisk in Halberstam's *trans** signifies not an identity but a "politics of transitivity" that "holds off the certainty of diagnosis" (*Trans**, xiii, 4). On the dangers of necessarily equating female masculinity with lesbianism, see also Halberstam, *Female Masculinity*, esp. 46.

18. Gender inversion, or contrary sexual instinct, was first identified as a medicopsychological diagnostic category in 1869 by Karl Friedrich Otto Westphal in "Die conträre Sexualempfindung."

19. This opposition between psyche and biology is now consistent with contemporary popular and medical explanations for what the *Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders* (*DSM-V*) used to call transgenderism and since May 2013 has identified as "gender dysphoria."

20. Historians situate this transition in different periods. George Chauncey argues that in 1920s America "the liberalization of gender norms" made it possible to see women in active roles; if a woman could initiate sex, then gender inversion was no longer a convincing explanation for homosexual desire ("From Sexual Inversion to Homosexuality," 143–44). Régis Revenin places this shift in the 1960s, when he claims that the "hetero-homo" binary became hegemonic (*Une histoire des garçons*).

21. Kennedy and Davis make a similar argument for the impact of lesbian bars on gender performance in Buffalo, New York, during the 1940s and 1950s (*Boots of Leather*). It is noteworthy that this narrative (which explains homosexuality as either gender inversion or object choice) has contributed to effacing what Emily Skidmore calls the "trans potential" of many historical subjects (*True Sex*).

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of a female same-sex couple, thus exemplifying *both* medical explanations of homosexuality as gender inversion *and* later explanations of homosexuality fixed on object choice. These gendered performances were also racialized in unique ways. While this binary construct was not hegemonic (the French police and much of the press clung to the solo "masculine gender invert" script into the 1960s), this newly twinned vision pushed the "femme," who often plays a minor role in histories of female homosexuality, to the fore while challenging medical wisdom: not least because when a feminine woman expressed desire for a masculine female partner (as Nin did in this article's opening anecdote), she contradicted the tenets of gender inversion by taking the "active" (i.e., male) role.

In what follows, I argue that the figure of the cross-dressed *entraîneuse*—the female staff member hired to animate the *cabaret féminin* while garbed in masculine attire—played a special role in promulgating a sexual schema ("butch/femme") that is usually explained as a product either of biology, of moral failure, or of erotic choice. My work reveals instead the important place of the commercial entertainment industry in shaping French Sapphic subcultures from the interwar to the post–World War II years. My goal is simple: I aim to show how the sartorial practices that were both popularized *and required* by the Sapphic cabaret in the 1930s sustained a repertoire of paired gender performances that came to signify lesbian desire in ways that proved (to the French public but especially to women who loved women) remarkably enduring in the decades that followed. The outcome was threefold: first, these entertainment venues both reinforced and undermined normative gender binaries while enabling subcultural community and counterpublic formation; second, they rendered the feminine woman legible *as a lesbian* to broader audiences; and third, they ensured that the already identifiable "butch" (long perceived as abnormal) was more readily subjected to surveillance, control, and persecution.

Inventing Butch/Femme at the Sapphic Cabaret

Despite featuring "acts" (singers, dancers, burlesque shows), the Parisian *cabarets féminins* that appeared in Montmartre and Montparnasse in the interwar years functioned mainly as nightclubs where women could dance together. Unlike in Britain, in France "lesbian bars" were identified as such on the streets and in the press; both signage and advertising made their target audiences—women interested in other women—unambiguously clear.[22] Sapphic cabarets inevitably attracted voyeurs, but a male public was discouraged. *Cabarets féminins* hired women known as *entraîneuses* to beguile their female patrons into

22. Maryse Choisy calls Le Fétiche a *bar à lesbiennes* (lesbian bar) in *Un mois chez les filles*, 84. In contrast, according to Rebecca Jennings, in Britain such spaces were "not listed in any public forum until the late 1960s" (*Tomboys*, 117).

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drinking and dancing, since the longer customers stayed, the more they paid. These venues were particularly renowned for the masculine women who frequented them as both employees and clients.[23]

Sapphic cabarets promoted specific forms of fashionable display as signifiers of nonnormative desire. Le Monocle, for example, helped turn a preference in dress into a sexual symbol: its peculiar name derives from the interwar fashion (particularly popular among women of a certain Sapphic sensibility) for sporting a monocle as part of a sartorial statement of sexual intent. Calling it one of "the most recognizable and readable signs of lesbian culture in Paris," Marjorie B. Garber makes an apt association between the monocle and the Lacanian "phallus," which can be "left to dangle" or "propped up imperiously as a sign of attentiveness."[24] Although she risks, in Laura Doan's words, "rigidly conjoin[ing] accessory and identity," Garber makes clear that in interwar France the monocle was often evidence of not only a fashion statement but also an "erotic style."[25] A black tuxedo, white dress shirt, cravat, straight black skirt, crêpe-soled shoes, aggressive stance, cropped hairstyle slicked back with brilliantine, cigarette casually cocked between the fingers and (sometimes, according to Colette) "a white carnation in the buttonhole" joined this trendy ocular affectation to complete the look of those manly female figures that Maryse Choisy qualified as *les actives* (the active ones) in her 1932 essay "Dames seules" ("Women Alone").[26]

Today we often understand cross-dressing and female masculinity exclusively through modern categories of sexual identity: the subject is either a butch-lesbian or transgender identified. This reductive view—in which female masculinity "equals" some form of sexual or gender inversion—is in part the result of how medical taxonomies established in the nineteenth century gradually foreclosed on a disorderly array of other sexual and gendered possibilities. The Sapphic cabaret participated in this process of identity stabilization. In interwar France female masculinity had still signified a host of other options, from fashionable modernity (embodied by *la garçonne*, the youthful tomboy who seduced both women and men in Victor Margueritte's 1922 novel of the same name) to gender-crossing, where women "passed" as men for theatrical, financial, political, or other pragmatic reasons.[27] In contrast, inside the *cabaret féminin* (a

23. Numerous press, advertising, and personal sources attest to this. *Fantasio* magazine, for example, describes a Montmartre *cabaret féminin* populated by women "who dress voluntarily as gentlemen" (Oct. 15, 1924, 128).

24. Garber, *Vested Interests*, 153–54.

25. Doan, *Fashioning Sapphism*, 108; Garber, *Vested Interests*, 154.

26. Colette, *The Pure and the Impure*, 75; Choisy, "Dames seules."

27. Margueritte, *La garçonne*. See also Bard, *Les garçonnes*.

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location explicitly marked as sexually libertine) masculine women attempted neither to attract the male gaze nor to "pass." They *presented*—regardless of gender identification—as *women* who desired women.[28] Their aim was same-sex sexual seduction. Their proximity to feminine women who desired them in return was the source of both their appeal and their threat.

Representing Female Masculinity: Brassaï at Le Monocle

Among the few photographs that survive of French *cabarets féminins* from this period, the most memorable are those shot in 1932 in the dimly lit smoke-filled interior of Le Monocle by Brassaï—a man whom writer Henry Miller once described as "the eye of Paris."[29] These now iconic shots—tuxedo-clad masculine women drinking champagne, elegant (female) couples dancing or flirting—have attracted popular and scholarly attention ever since a small selection of them first appeared in 1934 in a collection titled *Voluptés de Paris*.[30] François Buet, Florence Tamagne, Helmut Gernsheim, and Allen Ellenzweig are among those who unanimously interpret Brassaï's photographs as "documentary statements" "not of public behavior, but of private conduct" in which "the subject of homosexuality" speaks "for itself."[31]

The photographs are fascinating and intimate: one depicts a tall feminine blonde in a fetching hat, her dress adorned with a wide collar and draping bow, her small breasts pressed tightly against those of her black-suited masculine partner (identifiable as none other than the cabaret's proprietor, Lulu de Montmartre), who inclines her head and sneaks a kiss.[32] In another (fig. 1), the same girl perched on a bentwood stool in front of the bar converses with Lulu, whose hand, flashing a signet ring on the pinky finger—an established Sapphic symbol—is placed possessively on her companion's thigh.[33] Behind the counter,

28. To this end, and although it is sometimes difficult to discern, in the images that follow, *all* of the masculine women are wearing skirts. Whether this choice was mainly in compliance with the November 7, 1800, French law that forbade women from wearing pants in Paris unless they possessed a police permit is impossible to say. While an exception to the law was made in 1882 for female cyclists and equestrians, the ruling was not abrogated until 2013. Bard, *Une histoire politique du pantalon*.

29. Miller, quoted in Tucker, *Eye of Paris*, 43.

30. A second version of *Voluptés de Paris* was published in 1935. Unhappy with the production values, Brassaï disowned both publications. In 1976 he republished the Monocle photographs in *Le Paris secret*.

31. The quotes are from Ellenzweig, *Homoerotic Photograph*, 66, 74. See also Buet, *Gay Paris*, 116; Gernsheim, quoted in Tucker, *Eye of Paris*, 39; and Tamagne, *History of Homosexuality*, 1:68. Although Frances E. Hutchins's sophisticated analysis reminds us of the constructed nature of these shots (they were posed), her emphasis on "femme" invisibility implies that the photographs depict "real" "butch/femme" couples ("Pleasures of Discovery").

32. Publication rights for this photograph could not be obtained. It can be accessed at multiple sites online. Other women are frequently incorrectly identified as Lulu in Brassaï's photographs. The real Lulu can be seen here in figure 1.

33. Eve Pascal discusses the pinky ring as a "distinctive sign" of sapphism in Lootgieter, "Femmes des sixties," 94.

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FIGURE 1 Brassaï, "Lulu de Montparnasse habillée en smoking avec une femme au 'Monocle.'" ArtRes 583847/RMN 00-021263. Courtesy of Art Resource/Réunion des Musées Nationaux Grand Palais.

the female bartender in white shirt and black tie pours a drink for another debonair mannish type, whose severe black skirt is rakishly set off by a satin stripe. Yet another portrait (fig. 2) depicts an urbane young man—no, woman—smoking and drinking, costumed in black jacket and tuxedo collar, a thick watchband clasped around one wrist. And then there is the photograph (fig. 3)

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FIGURE 2 Brassaï, "Lulu de Montparnasse buvant seule au 'Monocle.'" (This title is incorrect: it is *not* a photo of Lulu de Montparnasse. She can be seen in figure 1, on the left.) ArtRes 583848/RMN 00-021300. Courtesy of Art Resource/Réunion des Musées Nationaux Grand Palais.

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FIGURE 3 Brassaï, "Au 'Monocle,' un couple." ArtRes 583850/RMN 01-010190. Courtesy of Art Resource/Réunion des Musées Nationaux Grand Palais.

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often referred to as "Lesbian Couple at Le Monocle": here we see a heavyset masculine woman usually identified as "Fat Claude" (but who according to the historian Xavier Demange is actually the French athlete and Nazi collaborator Violette Morris), her tie loosened, fingers grazing the slender elbow of her feminine date, a woman with rouged lips, arched brows, and a fashionable marcel wave in her silken hair, whose plunging neckline reveals a waifish frame.[34]

These women appear to be mutually smitten and slightly bemused by the scenario that we are witnessing—subtle smiles are present on the lips of the bartender, the young "man," the seated couple. This space seems to belong to them, and they appear confident in their ownership of it. More important, it is equally possible to presume that we are witnessing photographic evidence of a community that has fully embraced a "butch/femme" aesthetic. And this is precisely how most viewers (and scholars) interpret these images. Halberstam's conclusions are a case in point. The photographs at Le Monocle, Halberstam submits, "tell more than Brassaï can ever narrate: of inventive transgendering, the careful remodeling of the 'heterosexual matrix' by butch-femme couples reveling in the possibilities that Paris at night offered them in the 1930s."[35]

But is this reading accurate? My research suggests a more complicated picture. And clothing—what we wear, and how and why we wear it—is at its heart.

Cross-Dressing Required: Creating the (White?) *Entraîneuse*

When the white Parisian woman later known as Frede first arrived at Le Monocle at age twenty in search of employment, she was still using her given name, Suzanne Jeanne Baulé. Born out of wedlock on November 8, 1914, Frede (then Suzanne) was raised in a modest apartment on the Rue Labat in Montmartre. At seventeen Suzanne abandoned her studies and landed a gig painting scenery at the Folies-Bergère music hall. Tall and slim, she was soon asked to perform as a *figurante*—a silent extra—in one of the Folies-Bergère's spectacular extravaganzas. Her efforts fell flat; Suzanne's allure was too masculine. Advised instead to try her luck at a new cabaret in Montmartre, Suzanne made her way to the Boulevard Edgar Quinet. In a 1971 TV broadcast about her life (the first French documentary to address at length—if indirectly—female homosexuality) Frede reminisces that by the time she walked back out of Le Monocle's doorway in 1934 with a job as an *entraîneuse*, her feminine garb had been replaced by a mannish black tuxedo, straight skirt,

34. Demange in Tucker, *Eye of Paris*, 43.
35. Halberstam, *Queer Art*, 101.

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and tie (fig. 4).[36] Henceforth the statuesque girl with the catlike eyes also had a new (and far more masculine) first name.[37]

The metamorphosis was not simple. Frede reports: "I had a little suit [that] was horrible to wear. It wasn't easy, but one didn't have a choice."[38] *One didn't have a choice*. Even given that such testimonies—like all oral histories—often tell us as much about the moment of recollection as they do about the events they describe, Frede's story reveals a rather astonishing possibility: at least some of the women who peopled the *cabarets féminins* cross-dressed not out of personal inclination (or at least, not at first) but because their jobs demanded it. Cross-dressing was compulsory. Indeed, Sapphic cabarets hired and required both masculine and feminine *entraîneuses*. According to a 1938 article in *Police Magazine*, half of the twenty girls working at Le Monocle that year—designated as *les féminines*—were outfitted in evening gowns or cocktail dresses, and the rest—called *les garçonnes*—were dressed mannishly, in smoking jackets, flats, straight skirts, and ties.[39] Staff could be asked to reverse gender roles dependent on management's needs.[40] Once obliged to adopt masculine attire, however, some *entraîneuses* (Frede included), consistently donned mannish garb in both public and private life (fig. 5).

From the outset French Sapphic cabarets were thus sites of visible, vestimentary difference where the imperatives of the market supported the transgression of gender, sexual, and class norms. These economically and affectively motivated logics of social transgression were tied to racial metrics in complex ways. On the one hand (and although Brassaï's images of white women at Le Monocle suggest otherwise), nonwhite bodies were both present in and a point of attraction at the *cabaret féminin*. As an expanding imperial power, metropolitan France's racially diverse population had been growing steadily since the early nineteenth century. By the mid-1920s negrophilia, fed by the hype over American jazz and the celebrity of African American entertainers like Ada "Bricktop" Smith and Josephine Baker (who seduced Paris at nineteen wearing little more than a skirt fashioned from bananas and who regularly appeared cross-dressed

36. On Frede's life, see Cosnard, *Frede*; and Casanova, "Frede Carroll écrit." See also Miki Leff Papers; Pierre Philippe's 1971 half-hour documentary *Frédé*; and File 77 W art. 995-308704, Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris (hereafter APP).

37. Suzanne's rechristening as the gender-ambiguous Frede (diminutive of either the feminine Frédérique or the masculine Frédéric) was not unusual; many *entraîneuses* either adopted or were given a masculine alias to fit a newly gendered image. Of the thirty-eight *entraîneuses* (of ninety-two) identified as lesbians in the police files discussed below, more than half are associated with masculine monikers.

38. Philippe, *Frédé*.

39. Moris, "Le secret," 6. Sometimes the mannish *entraîneuse* also bound her breasts. Kiko K., interview by author, Paris, Jan. 18, 2018.

40. File 163878 JC/CAB 4, APP, shows photos of an *entraîneuse* working in both masculine and feminine attire.

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FIGURE 4 Frede shortly after being hired at Le Monocle, 1930s. Courtesy of Roy Winnick, Princeton, NJ.

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FIGURE 5 Frede and her "wife," Miki Leff, 1954. On the back, Miki has written "Newlyweds. Property of Marilyn 'Miki' Leff." The "marriage" lasted until Frede's death in 1976. Courtesy of Roy Winnick, Princeton, NJ.

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in white tie, top hat, and tails), made dark skin the raging fashion.[41] According to a 1928 exposé on the seamy underworld of Parisian prostitution, Baker's sexualized popularity ensured that neither a Parisian brothel nor a *cabaret féminin* "was complete without its Negress."[42] Other period photographs from the 1930s through the 1950s also attest to the presence of nonwhite women in French Sapphic spaces.[43]

On the other hand, if French Sapphic cabarets promoted racial mixing, they also reinscribed racial hierarchies in which female masculinity appears to have been—unlike in lesbian bars in the United States, and notwithstanding celebrity exceptions like Baker—largely a prerogative of whiteness.[44] Certainly the square logo sketched on Le Monocle's first business cards demonstrates the commercial appropriation of a colonial fascination with race, sexuality, and gender that also shores up patriarchal white supremacy (fig. 6). The drawing depicts a mannish white woman with cropped hair (severely clad in a black smoking jacket and tie and sporting a monocle), watching a dark-skinned topless female attired only in a grass skirt (or is it bananas?) who is dancing "savagely" while a white female orchestra plays in the background. Such perspectives endured: two decades later photographs from Frede's Le Carroll's Club taken in the 1950s show a feminine black woman in a turban, her colorful dress edged in ruffles, embracing a fake male lion inside a large cage (fig. 7). These are instances where white privilege—Le Monocle's, Frede's—traffics in stereotypes for financial profit, but they also remind us of the ways that whiteness has historically been used to render certain incarnations of gender and sexual variance more socially acceptable than others.[45]

The fact that as early as the 1930s Sapphic cabaret managers believed it commercially advantageous to provide their female customers with white and nonwhite women attired in both masculine and feminine dress indicates the degree to which they understood female same-sex desire as a deeply gendered and racialized construct. Cabaret staff were schooled in this understanding:

41. On race and colonialism in interwar Paris, see Stovall, *Paris Noir*. For a gendered perspective, see Boittin, *Colonial Metropolis*. On Bricktop and Baker, see Sharpley-Whiting, *Bricktop's Paris*; see also Baker and Chase, *Josephine*; and Guterl, *Josephine Baker and the Rainbow Tribe*. Both Baker and Bricktop purportedly engaged in affairs with other women, including each other.

42. Choisy, *Un mois chez les filles*, 38.

43. I am thinking of photographs by Albert Harlingue of Le Monocle in the 1930s and by Francis Bay and Willy Rizzo of Frede's Le Carroll's Club in the 1950s.

44. While this requires more research, my sources uniformly suggest the persistence of racially gendered hierarchies in these cabarets linking whiteness to masculinity. This differentiates their dynamics considerably from those seen in lesbian bars in the United States, where many butch lesbians were Black or Brown. Elizabeth Lapovsky Kennedy and Madeline D. Davis argue for the precocious emergence of racial egalitarianism inside lesbian bars that was so powerful that it produced racially mixed working-class lesbian communities in Buffalo, New York, during the 1940s and 1950s (*Boots of Leather*). We see nothing of the kind in France at this time.

45. On this process, see Skidmore, *True Sex*, 99.

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VOUS TROUVEREZ AU
MONOCLE
LE FAMEUX ORCHESTRE FÉMININ
RICO, DAVIS ET SENES
TÉLÉPH. CABARET :
DANTON 41-30
Ouverture à 22 heures
LA CÉLÈBRE DISEUSE AMÉRICAINE RICKY
MLLE MALOU, REINE DE LA BÉGUINE
JO ROSALIE, JEAN, ROBERT, PETIT LOUIS,
BÉBÉ MARIN, CLAUDE, MARIO, BOBY,
LA BARWOMANN SYLVIE-O — COSTUMES DE RUSCONI

FIGURE 6 Le Monocle, business card (1933–34). Dossier 1 W 1032-46033. Courtesy of the Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris.

if a masculine *entraîneuse* failed to attract immediate interest when she showed up at a patron's table to offer champagne or ask a woman to dance, she was instructed to make herself scarce so that she could quickly be replaced by one of her more feminine colleagues.[46] Likewise, if a white masculine woman proved unpalatable, a feminine one, whether nonwhite or not, might better stimulate the appetites of the cabaret's clientele.

Management endorsed an understanding of female same-sex desire in which both masculine *and* feminine gender performances were key. In contrast (and paralleling the burgeoning medical literature in France, Germany, and England), press coverage of these venues was almost solely obsessed with female masculinity—a clear indication of how it troubled (and titillated) social norms. For decades, journalists ensured that international audiences knew that cross-dressed female staff were a staple at the French Sapphic cabaret: Evelyn Waugh, for example, reported in 1930 in the London *Fortnightly Review* that on a recent visit to Le Fétiche (the first known *cabaret féminin* in France) "the waitresses wore dinner jackets and asked the ladies in the party to dance."[47] In 1958 the American entertainment newspaper *Variety* asked "Who Wears the Pants?" in these venues, noting that at Le Monocle and Chez Moune (which it calls

46. Moris, "Le secret," 6.

47. Waugh, "Labels," 496. Did Waugh grasp this gendered performance as "homosexual" rather than simply immoral? Its staging within a space known for same-sex transgression suggests that he did.

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FIGURE 7 Performance at Le Carroll's Club, 1950s. © Francis Bay, Series 5907, No. 127, Nice, France. Courtesy of Roy Winnick, Princeton, NJ.

"travesty places"), "one cannot tell a man from a woman."[48] While it is possible that Waugh and others understood such cross-dressing practices as more indicative of immorality than same-sex sexual subjectivity, the repeated association in the mass media of butch/femme performance with couples known for their Sapphic proclivities cemented this connection in the public imagination.

In 1963 "Torrid Three from Gay Paree" (an exposé about three French cabarets called "switcheroos"—Le Monocle, Frede's Le Carroll's Club, and Madame

48. *Variety*, "Who Wears the Pants?"

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Moune's Chez Moune—published in the US transgender magazine *Female Mimics*) (fig. 8) revealed that the obsession with French female masculinity had not waned. In "clubs where Women do the Man bit!" the article gushes, "all the waiters and other help are women dressed like men." These cabarets, it adds, "cater to those gals who would be guys and dress and act accordingly." At the same time, a caption above a photo of Madame Moune poised to tango with a smiling young woman with a mass of long dark curls attired in a pencil skirt and high-necked blouse fastened with delicate pearl buttons (fig. 9) admits, "Dancing with the female customers is part of the job for Moune; this gal is one of the rare ones dressed like one."[49]

The admission that (even if rare) *some* women "dressed like" *women* at these venues emphasizes that there were indeed feminine women at Sapphic cabarets. Moreover, while the text above the image of Moune and her feminine partner targets "gals who would be guys and dress and act accordingly," a hard look at the photograph is instructive: excepting her necktie and masculine collar, Madame Moune is wearing nothing that differs much from what a severely dressed mature woman might wear on the street. What makes the image transgressive is not her mannish clothing; it is the feminine girl in her arms. And it was the public production of this coupled construct that made the Sapphic cabarets such powerful places; importantly, their gendered practices also educated the very audiences to whom they sought to appeal.

In this way, Sapphic cabarets used the *entraîneuse* as a vehicle to offer a particular vision of same-sex female desire to their customers. How did French women seeking other women who crossed the thresholds of these venues respond?

"They All Resembled Me": The Power of Numbers

Women who visited Sapphic cabarets had different reactions both to the spectacle of "butch/femme" performance and to the figure of the cross-dressed *entraîneuse*. For some, this was not the first time that they had chanced upon female couples who performed gender and sexuality in nonnormative ways. Evelyne Rochedereux has vivid childhood memories of her gym teacher Mademoiselle F. walking through the streets with her "friend" Mademoiselle H. (the latter clad in a tie, suit, and vest, her hair styled very short) in the tiny Breton fishing village of Le Croisic in the early 1940s.[50] Others have no such memories. "Growing up," many women told me, "such women simply did not exist."[51]

49. See *Female Mimics*, "Torrid Three," 60, 61.

50. Rochedereux, interview by author, Le Croisic, France, Dec. 15, 2010. On the methodological challenges of using personal narratives and oral interviews to write history, see Summerfield, *Histories of the Self*.

51. See, e.g., Isselé, interview by author, Paris, June 17, 2013.

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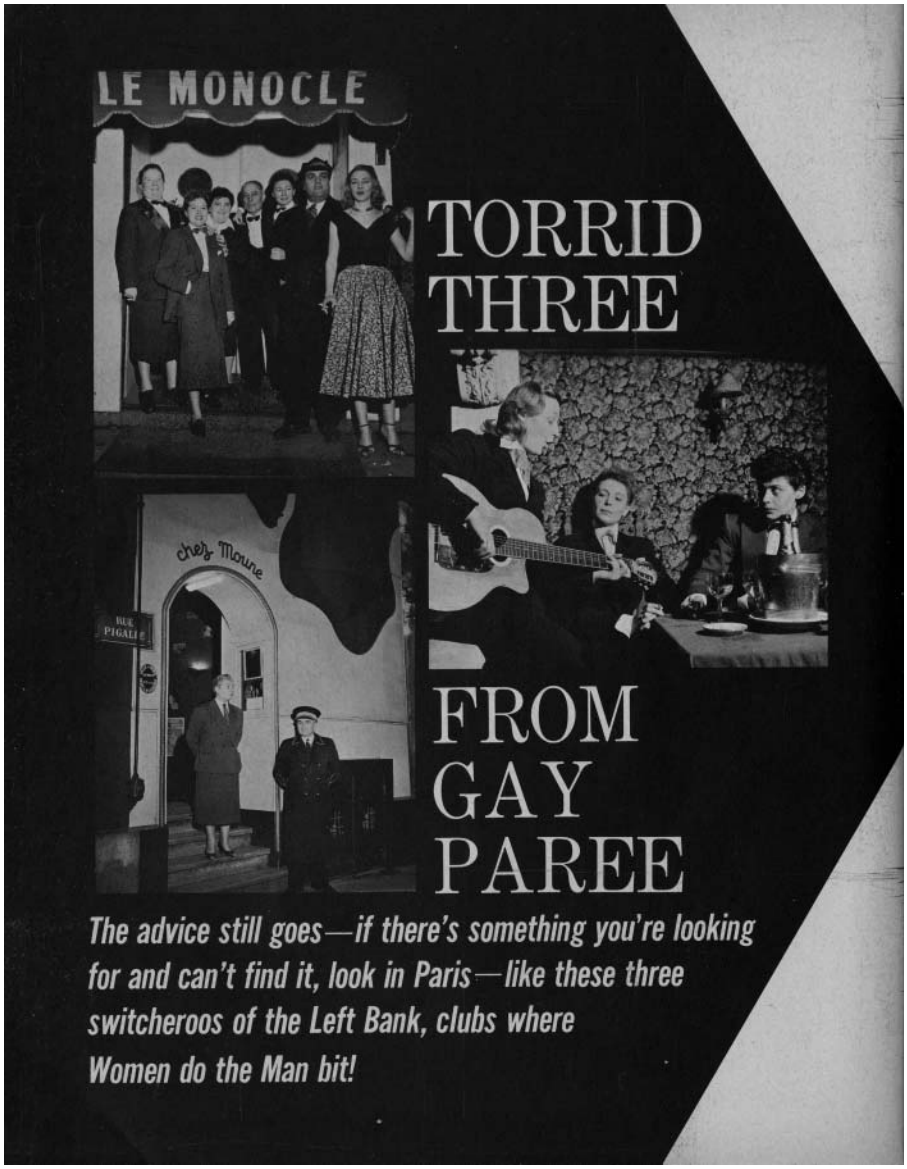
LE MONOCLE
TORRID THREE
chez Moune
RUE PIGALLE
FROM GAY PAREE
The advice still goes—if there's something you're looking for and can't find it, look in Paris—like these three switcheroos of the Left Bank, clubs where Women do the Man bit!

FIGURE 8 Clockwise from top: Le Monocle, Le Carroll's Club (with Frede on the right), and Chez Moune. Cover image from "Torrid Three from Gay Paree." *Female Mimics* 1, no. 3 (1963): 54.

Nonnormative gender performance was notable because it was rare. Thus the real revelation of the *cabaret féminin* lay in its numbers: it was the encounter with not just one or two cross-dressed individuals (a gym teacher, a social worker, an antiques dealer) and their feminine partners, but with entire communities so paired, that counted.

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For Hélène Azenor, the Bal de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève, where in the 1930s she encountered women dressed in what she later termed "lesbian fashion," was riveting precisely because she saw herself in the masculine women she discovered there: "The women, short hair, suit and tie; I was stupefied to see that they all resembled me!"[52] Azenor was entranced by the cross-dressed *entraîneuses*, women whose dashing "black tuxedos with satin lapels, like a smoking jacket," she found "pleasing."[53] In contrast, Rolande Aurival claimed to have avoided "clubs known as 'specialized,'" where "one went specifically to meet lesbians," and in which "butch/femme" couples dominated.[54] Both Natalie Barney and Djuna Barnes loathed such bars, finding them garish and sleazy. Barney also disapproved of women who cross-dressed, abhorring "the need to mime the male in dress, speech, and demeanor."[55] Others adored the liberty that the cabarets, with their gender fluidity and sexual license, allowed.

FIGURE 9 Madame Moune and client at Chez Moune in "Torrid Three from Gay Paree." *Female Mimics* 1, no. 3 (1963): 61.

Barbara Bell and her girlfriend traveled to Paris from England in the early 1930s expressly to locate "lesbian" nightlife. They ended up at Le Monocle.

52. Azenor, *Histoire d'une*, 209.
53. Azenour, in Lesselier, *Instants de vie*.
54. Aurival, in Lesselier, *Pour mémoire*.
55. Benstock, *Women of the Left Bank*, 11.

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Interviewed in the 1990s, Bell recalled: "I couldn't tell whether they were men or women sitting on these stools. They were really very butchy and very fem [*sic*]. . . . We didn't look outrageous like they were, but I suppose they dressed up for the evening, a lot of them. . . . There were so many tables, with little lamps, so many women, all lesbian, no men at all. Oh God, was I thrilled! It was out of this world. It was paradise."[56]

Like Azenor and Aurival, Bell's attribution of the terms *lesbian*, *butchy*, and *fem[me]* to these women may be anachronistic, yet her memories reveal both a comfort with gendered roles and the vital importance of this type of female space to the women who sought it out. Bell probably did not realize that many of the women she observed "dressed up for the evening" were *entraîneuses* wearing their requisite uniforms. Nevertheless (and especially given Bell's enthusiasm), the "outrageous" outfits that these women wore might well have become fashions to aspire to—reinforcing how Sapphic cabarets modeled both sexual behavior and subcultural style for their publics.[57] At the same time, whereas Bell found the experience "paradise," for other women the presence of the *entraîneuse* was deeply distressing, even repugnant. Monique Isselé, who visited Sapphic cabarets in the 1950s, told me, "I was shocked by the *entraîneuses* dressed as men, with whom one had to dance. I didn't like it at all. Androgyny? Yes well, I liked a masculine side but not when it was flaunted; these women were making a living; they had a percentage of what we drank. For them, it was a disguise."[58] For Isselé it was the seeming inauthenticity, even more than the *entraîneuse*'s commercial role, that put her off. The problem resulted not from a discord between sex assigned at birth and gender performance. The problem was possible pretense: the aping of a desire for women that was not real.

Dislike of the *entraîneuse* who impersonated Sapphic desire—although not all were "faking it"—is all the more understandable when we consider that for many women who loved other women, "normal life" was itself a form of forced impersonation. Adopting masculine clothing—to the degree permitted—was one way of making same-sex female desire more visible.[59] Even Isselé acknowledges this. For a period, she wore a *lavellière* tie, and there are photos from the early 1950s (fig. 10) where, she notes, "I took on boyish airs [one image depicts her seated on a bench in a jacket, tie, and plaid shirt, her hair cropped] but," she adds, "I was very young." "If we looked like boys," she explains "it was

56. Bell, *Just Take Your Frock Off*, 45–46.

57. On fashion as a visible marker of queer subjectivity, see Geczy and Karaminas, *Queer Style*; and Steele, *Queer History of Fashion*.

58. Isselé, interview, June 17, 2013.

59. We must remember that in France women "didn't have the right to wear pants, even in winter" (Pascal, quoted in Lootgieter, "Femmes des sixties," 94).

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to please girls, because girls generally like boys, so we can't seduce them if we don't resemble boys, at least a little bit."[60]

In the 1930s Sapphic cabarets (and the masculine and feminine *entraîneuses* who worked there) modeled same-sex desire as a binary gendered behavior that could be assumed, manipulated, and transformed. Importantly, they modeled this en masse. For many women, discovering these venues and the erotic freedom they provided was life-changing. Hegemonic perspectives nevertheless shaped expectations: girls were presumed to be attracted to "boys," femininity to masculinity. Sapphic cabarets capitalized on these beliefs. As the twentieth century progressed, however, the insistent normalization of the nuclear family (understood as reproductive, heterosexual, married, and monogamous), and the fashionable promotion of glamorous femininity in France (in the form of Christian Dior's ultrawomanly "New Look") rendered female masculinity increasingly reprehensible. Consequently, archival records reveal that by the 1950s—especially from the perspective of the police—nine times out of ten only the mannish partner was targeted as lesbian. Clothing clinched the argument nearly every time.

FIGURE 10 Monique Isselé, at nineteen, in Clermont-Ferrand in 1951. On the back, Monique has written, "Disdainful, authoritarian . . . haughty allure . . . close to . . . reality!" Courtesy of Monique Isselé, Paris.

Police Surveillance: "A Very Decidedly Masculine Type"

The Archives de la Préfecture de Police de Paris, especially the holdings compiled after World War II by the Brigade Mondaine (Vice Brigade), provide us with critical insights into the ways in which an administrative power relied on

60. Isselé, interview, June 17, 2013.

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gendered conventions of dress in its attempts to identify (if not always control) female same-sex desire in the years immediately following World War II.[61] Vice police were not neutral—individuals might be more or less prejudiced or moralizing—but such men were inevitably, as Kevin Mumford remarks in the American case, "keen observers of detail."[62] Dialogues transcribed in these documents also provide information (admittedly mediated) about how some women viewed their own behaviors.

The decision to collect what were known as *les blancs* (white papers: a format developed to gather information on prostitutes) about women working in the cabarets was motivated by police interest in monitoring subversive sexual practices—in this case "lesbianism." At least ninety-two of these numerically coded loose-leaf reports prepared mainly between 1946 and 1951 targeted women hired as *entraîneuses*.[63] The sheer extent of these files (which were not themselves arrest records and which had little judicial power) enables unprecedented examination of this milieu.[64] While sex between adult women was not illegal, with both the MRP (Mouvement Républicain Populaire) and the Communist Party calling for a return to traditional values, these files betray a pointed anxiety about lesbianism in the postwar moment; almost every single dossier includes an inquiry into and a determination about the same-sex desires of the woman it concerns.

Each of these documents reproduces a standardized set of data (name, date and place of birth, civil and parental status, type, cost, and location of current domicile) that is coupled by educational, employment, and arrest history. Most describe the appearance of the woman under consideration, specifically noting the gendered nature of her clothing. Forty of these files include photographs, generally taken either when a woman registered for employment or, less frequently, if she was booked for arrest. These women range in age from

61. On the history of the Brigade Mondaine, see Willemin, *La Mondaine*, esp. 50–93.

62. Mumford, *Interzones*, xiv.

63. The files addressed here are from the series JC/CAB 1, 2, 3, and 4, as well as JC/HP 2, APP. The JC series derives from the files of the Brigade Mondaine. My thanks to Isabelle Tarisca and the archivists at the APP and to Pierre Guadin, *directeur du cabinet* at the Préfecture de Police, for their assistance in accessing documents examined here.

64. Police archives have proved invaluable in reconstructing the history of male homosexuality in nineteenth- and early twentieth-century France. It is generally maintained, however, that lesbians are "almost entirely absent" from these holdings. For example, Murat argues that the absence of lesbianism as an indexical category in nineteenth-century police registers suggests that this practice was not considered significant (*La loi du genre*, 70–71). At the same time, as my work shows, failure to index does not necessarily mean that such files do not exist (a point Murat also concedes)—we may simply not be looking in the right places. Thus, whereas Régis Revenin informed me (email, Dec. 5, 2017) that he had found only three files on lesbians in the Paris police archives for the period from 1933 forward when researching his book *Une histoire des garçons*, my searches under the rubric "Cabaret" produced, as this article demonstrates, vastly different results.

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eighteen to forty-eight. Over half were under twenty-six. Half were born in Paris. The rest hailed from all parts of France, including Corsica and the French Antilles. There were a number of foreigners: a Swiss, a Belgian, a Pole, a Bulgarian. One was American—a twenty-six-year-old singer named Mary Meade from Tulsa, Oklahoma. Those who were French had all benefited from the Third Republic's educational system: most left formal schooling between the ages of thirteen and seventeen, often with a certificate. A few advanced to higher education, but this was unusual—one studied medicine, another law. The majority were from the ranks of the working class and the petty bourgeoisie. Most had held stereotypically feminine jobs (shopgirls, seamstresses, secretaries, governesses, hairdressers, domestic servants), but there were also farm laborers as well as one mechanic and one engineer. A few were aspiring actresses, models, musicians, or dancers and one was a trapeze artist (she became an *entraîneuse* only after recovering from a horrifying fall in which she fractured both arms and legs and injured her spine).[65] Although twelve were married, the vast majority were single. Six were separated. Eleven were divorced. Two were widowed. Most lived alone in furnished rooms that were rented by the day, the week, or the month. They moved frequently—often staying no more than a few weeks or months at one address.

All forty women for whom photographs exist in the dossiers appear to be white. Whether this is true of the remaining fifty-two, we cannot know for sure, but both photographic evidence and testimonials suggest that although there were nonwhite performers and clients in Sapphic cabarets after the war, there were fewer nonwhite *entraîneuses* in the postwar years than in the 1930s. Several of the white women I interviewed who frequented these venues in the fifties expressed views—off the record—such as, "I don't think I'm a racist, but I couldn't imagine myself taking a woman of color as a lover." (One also confessed that—although she knew not why—she "was inordinately attracted to Jewesses.") Others admitted to short-term liaisons that crossed race lines, but interracial relationships that endured seem to have been exceedingly rare. Under the postwar impress of tensions over decolonization and immigration, the years of the *vogue nègre* when Josephine Baker was at the height of her popularity and when *cabarets féminins* found it commercially advantageous to hire women of color as *entraîneuses* appeared to be waning, but nonwhite performers remained popular.[66]

65. File 166150 JC/CAB 3, APP.

66. More work needs to be done on this. Todd Shepard's pathbreaking *Sex, France, and Arab Men* is among the first analyses of the complicated connections between race and (homo)sexuality in postwar France, but he focuses primarily, as his title announces, on men.

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Comparative analysis of police records shows that gender performance and sexual preferences influenced both how long women worked at the Sapphic cabarets and how much they were paid while there. For some women, the job appears to have been a last resort; positions were held for only a few weeks or months and quickly abandoned when better opportunities presented themselves. However, at least twenty-four women in the police files constructed their lives in the Sapphic cabarets, moving from one to the next over years or even decades. All save one of these women appeared masculine to their interlocutors.[67] Their persistent presence reminds us that the Sapphic cabaret was one of the few places within French society where mannish women were both permitted and paid to pursue same-sex desires. And the money was relatively good. While only one-third were guaranteed a daily wage (tips made up the lion's share of a woman's salary), an *entraîneuse* generally earned between 1,000 and 1,500 francs for a night's work (derived from a fixed salary—if there was one—plus a percentage of alcohol sold, supplemented by flower or cigarette sales). By way of comparison, in 1951 an unskilled female worker earned about 810 francs per day.[68] Those *entraîneuses* who slept with customers for pay—and some did, whether regularly or occasionally—obviously made more. But even the base earnings alone were evidently attractive.

The more closely we look at these files the more we see how precarious these women's circumstances could be. Class lines were slippery. It was easy to fall and hard to rise. An illness, an injury, a divorce, a child, and suddenly there was hardship, poverty, and sometimes alcoholism, drugs, prostitution, or crime. A third of these women were arrested. Several served time in women's prisons. Three were charged with *proxénétisme* (procuring or pimping). Seventeen had worked as prostitutes. Among these, half were recorded as *filles soumises* (registered prostitutes) between 1939 and 1945 (prior to the abolition of regulated prostitution in France in 1946), likely turning to sex work in response to hardships brought on by the war. But two-thirds had no criminal records. Interestingly, despite their "suspect" places of employment, even those identified as lesbians sometimes had good reputations. Juliette Reboursière, known as "Jo," a woman with over thirty years experience in the business and the manager of Le Monocle from 1939 into the 1960s, is a prime example. Her file states: "Despite her very special [masculine] allure and doubtful morals" as well as the fact that she "frequently returned home late so drunk that she couldn't find the door to her own flat," Jo was a woman who "was much esteemed for her generosity and

67. The exception was the feminine Lydie, whose case is discussed below. File 165886 JC/CAB 4, APP.

68. See Fourastié and Fourastié, *Pouvoir d'achat*, 37. This calculation is based on an average hourly wage of between 86 and 116 francs for an eight-hour day in October 1951.

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her good heart."[69] The nuance with which multiple reports handle the complicated connections between gender performance, sexual practices, and moral probity suggests that even for the police the link between sexual norms and social ethics was less self-evident than might be presumed.

The language—*lesbienne active*, *lesbienne notoire*, *lesbienne convaincue*, *lesbienne de nature*, or *émule de Lesbos* (active lesbian, notorious lesbian, convinced lesbian, natural lesbian, or follower of Lesbos)—and the sartorial criteria used to categorize women in these files nevertheless imply both judgment about female same-sex desire and a specific understanding of how it operated, namely, that it was almost assuredly present whenever women cross-dressed or otherwise transgressed gender norms. Thus one report depicts "Gitou" (also known as "Jacky") as follows: "*Lesbienne active*, small stature, a very decidedly masculine type . . . wears only masculine clothes."[70] Of another, called "Paule," the inspector writes, "Although she denies it, there is no doubt that [she] is a lesbian. All of her exterior comportment—hair styled *à la garçonne*, masculine gestures and manners—appears to indicate this vice."[71] Denise, described as a "convinced lesbian dressed as a man," forms "the perfect loving couple with Hélène."[72] And there is "Roby," a "*lesbienne active*, always dressed as a man, hair cut *à la garçonne* and cigarette between her lips," who apparently cannot "conceive of any other style of dress."[73] Or take "Jeannette," an *entraîneuse* at the Bal de la Montagne Sainte-Geneviève who is also "always dressed as a boy" and who "recently, for fun put on a woman's blouse and swore never to do that again, since she found the outfit too ridiculous" (the word *imbecilic* is crossed out).[74] On the other hand, if a woman's clothing and manner are feminine, then suspicions are immediately assuaged: "Nothing in her dress or speech leads one to believe that L.B. is an adept of Lesbos. She is only there [at Le Fétiche] for the money."[75] Again and again the dossiers reveal that female masculinity "proved" lesbianism, whereas femininity "proved" heterosexuality. In this way, the police fell victim to the same fantasy that Brassaï's photographs promote: the belief that image necessarily equates to reality.

If the police, the press, and the public were interested in categorizing women's gender performances and sexual preferences, the women targeted also had a stake in this process. Scrutinizing their responses to accusations of

69. File 133188 JC/CAB 4, APP.

70. To preserve anonymity, I refer to the women in these files by nickname or (if one isn't specified) by their initials. File 164137 JC/CAB 3, APP.

71. File 165647 JC/CAB 3, APP.

72. File 165641 JC/HP 2, APP.

73. File 163875 JC/CAB 4, APP.

74. File 158811 JC/CAB 4, APP.

75. File 166611 JC/CAB 3, APP.

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lesbianism is informative. Most women (not surprisingly given the term's powerful stigma) denied the charge.[76] Many claimed that they worked in these venues only "for the money" often presenting their children as justification for the choice. Others argue that when hired, they were totally innocent of the "special ambience" of these places.[77] Some of these women were not, had never been, and likely never would be, involved with other women. Among them were women who were regularly observed keeping intimate company with men.[78] Sometimes, even without such corroborating evidence, women's denials are given credence.[79] Social status could be influential: M.V. was the daughter of an important industrialist who worked for the government. When questioned on her choice of employment and mode of attire (she worked at Le Carroll's and was "always dressed as a boy"), M.V. claims that she was simply "preparing a report on the milieu." The agent, perhaps persuaded by M.V.'s prominent family background, appears to have accepted the tale.[80] At other times denials are dismissed, as in this report, which states: "Although she wears masculine clothes (for work reasons only, she claims) and has her hair cut *à l'aiglon* [a severe, mannish style] the above-named T denies being a follower of Lesbos" (and this despite her employment at Le Monocle, Le Fétiche and at another cabaret with a Sapphic bent known as Chez Magdeleine Barry). Nevertheless, in dark black print another hand has written on an angle across the bottom of the file: "Nota Bene: T. is indeed a lesbian." The included photo depicts an extremely masculine young woman wearing a plaid shirt with a string tie.[81]

Courageously courting scandal, not all women refuted accusations of lesbianism—sometimes with unexpected degrees of openness—demonstrating that even in the increasingly conservative postwar climate, same-sex female desire was not entirely closeted. One young *entraîneuse* admitted that she had been "a lesbian" for many years. "Jeannette," her file tells us, "has always had boyish tastes and has preferred boy's games since childhood, which made her parents angry." Arrested for "exercising the métier of *souteneur* [pimp], she has never had sexual relations with a man."[82] "Chouky," a chubby feminine blonde who is among the few women identified as a *lesbienne passive* makes the same revelation.[83] "Bobby," a mannish young woman from Toulouse photographed in a checked suit jacket and plaid scarf, "tried to combat this vice by getting married

76. File 166136 JC/CAB 3, APP.
77. File 167378 JC/CAB 3, APP.
78. File 164723 JC/CAB 2, APP.
79. File 124856 JC/CAB 3, APP.
80. File 167329 JC/CAB 2, APP.
81. File 165756 JC/CAB 3, APP.
82. File 158811 JC/CAB 4, APP.
83. File 163870 JC/CAB 4, APP.

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at the age of twenty." Unfortunately, "marriage did nothing to moderate her ardor for persons of her own sex," and "Bobby" now shares the same room with "La Tour." The two women "mutually profess that they share a passion that exceeds the bonds of friendship."[84] Finally, there are some women who are adamant about their preferences. "Conchita," a severe-looking thirty-three-year-old Spaniard working on an immigrant's visa and employed in the milieu since 1938, pulled no punches. "As concerns her morals," her file reports, "she doesn't hide her repulsion for the stronger sex and her passion for persons of her own gender." The comment is underlined in pink. "Moreover," the agent concludes, "she makes no effort at discretion, since she is almost always dressed as a man."[85]

At issue here is *not* whether these women "actually are" lesbians.[86] Rather, these sources highlight how important it was to the police to make this determination, show how the police continued to rely on clothing as a sign of sexual deviance, and illustrate how women attempted to respond to the categories that the police imposed. In this way, they help us explore some of the conditions under which a subject identified as "the lesbian" was repathologized in France in the mid-twentieth century. What we are witnessing is an arena in which the varieties of erotic possibility that opened up in the interwar era were foreclosed by an analytic process bent on forcing all female sexual desire into one of two possible categories in which "normal" women dress like women, and "lesbians" dress like men. These files also reveal that while some of the women who dressed as men in Sapphic cabarets desired other women and others did not, *all* of the women who worked in these spaces had an impact on the construction of an identity that came to be recognized as "lesbian."

Dressing (and Undressing): Selling Sapphic Sex

Sapphic cabarets were sometimes spaces where sex was sold, and Sapphic gender performances and vestimentary codes also shaped sex work.[87] Police files reveal that some women employed as *entraîneuses*—especially women who presented as feminine—prostituted themselves with men. Arrest records likewise indicate that others—generally described as masculine—worked as pimps, profiting from sex work performed by their feminine female partners. A few did both. Interestingly, the police dossiers for the *entraîneuses* that I reviewed were entirely silent

84. File 125449 JC/CAB 3, APP.

85. File 164821 JC/CAB 2, APP.

86. On sexual subjectivity as a historical problem, see especially Doan, *Disturbing Practices*; Foucault, *Introduction*; and Halperin, *How to Be Gay*.

87. By making "sexual commerce into spectacle," the Sapphic cabarets thus participated in what Andrew Israel Ross has called "the domestication of street solicitation" that began in the late nineteenth century (*Public City/Public Sex*, 203).

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on the subject of same-sex female prostitution. Barbara Bell's memoirs give us a rare glimpse into how female clients learned of these possibilities and explain how these sexual transactions transpired. She describes her experience at Le Monocle after the war as follows:

> I was sitting on my own at the bar when a young woman came and sat next to me, very feminine. She was working there as a hostess. The bar woman introduced us. I told her I'd visited the club before the war and we got talking. Then she said, "Would you like to come upstairs with me?" She asked the madam—"that's all right,"—so she took me upstairs to a little room with a big bed. . . . We chatted for a long time and then we had a drink and then we made love. You could have your drinks brought up and when you left you paid the madam for the drinks and the girl.
>
> I'd never paid for sex before—it made the experience more thrilling. It was just an experiment, a big adventure. It wasn't sheer lust, "I must have a woman, I'm going to pay for it." Nothing of that sort. You didn't have to do anything, the girl just came to you or the madam would ask you if you wanted a partner. You could choose a butchy one or a femmy one. You could just go up with somebody you got off with at the bar as well—if you were a fast pair.[88]

Once again, Bell's emphasis on gender difference ("You could choose a butchy one or a femmy one") reinforces the fact that sartorial codes and gender performances were presumed to play a role in motivating Sapphic desire. Bell's account also emphasizes that these cabarets sometimes provided access to private spaces where women could have sex with one another, whether money changed hands or not. Such spaces were especially important in an urban environment where privacy was not only hard to come by but actively compromised by the agents of the Service des Garnis (another branch of the police), who kept a daily record of the names of individuals who rented rooms in the hotels of Paris and the department of the Seine.[89] If two women were reported to have shared a single room, whether for one night or several, these records could be used to support accusations of lesbianism. While lesbianism was not technically criminalized between adults, such accusations, even when unproved, could lead to loss of employment or housing, social ostracism, and violence.

Regardless of the dangers, when no other options were available, women did rent rooms—by the hour, the day, or the week—to consummate their passions. Monique Isselé remembers being "solicited" once while sitting at the bar of L'Entre Nous in the late 1950s and deciding to court the risk associated with this practice. She told me that the whole experience took her by surprise, since she'd never thought of herself as "fast." "I was very young," Isselé recalls:

88. Bell, *Just Take Your Frock Off*, 120.
89. Willemin, *La Mondaine*, 84.

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> And she was very masculine. . . . I went with her to a hotel room. I was astonished to be there with that girl. Undressed, you know, she was all girl. And I spent a wonderful night with her. I never saw her again. I don't remember having paid her, but someone opened the door to ask whether she was available, and I was embarrassed. We were both naked, and I had thrown myself into something that was astonishing for me. She was masculine, but not too much. She was dressed, dressed for the performance you could say. And I ended up in a hotel room. I see it now.

In Isselé's memory, this woman was not an *entraîneuse*, although Isselé admits that she may have been a prostitute. "Prostitute, that is a vague word," she demurs. Isselé remembers the interaction as shaped by seduction and desire, however, not by commerce. In this instance the conventions of butch and femme are also shown to have been a matter of degree, for if the girl was "very masculine," Isselé was not herself dressed in feminine attire. "I was masculine when I went out to the cabarets," she states, "but not like her."[90] Both Bell and Isselé's testimonies also present us with another important finding: they augment a long history of scholarship on gay male prostitution by reminding us that it is not just men but also women who both sell and pay for homosexual sex, while suggesting that the pursuit of sexual contact—not just relationships or friendships—was a key part of Sapphic social life.

The "Male" Prerogative: Gender, Violence, and Sexual Power

The pictures painted by both Bell and Isselé of their sexual liaisons are remarkably positive, even gentle. But as we can imagine, this was not always the case. The world of the Sapphic cabaret where forbidden sex flourished could also be terribly violent, and that violence was perpetrated by both men and other women. *Entraîneuses* often found themselves implicated in these altercations. Romantic jealousy was augmented by alcohol. And when the *entraîneuse* flirted with customers, she risked angering women who (often fueled by drink) felt threatened by, or jealous of, her actions. Brawls frequently broke out between masculine women who were competing for the attentions of a femme.[91] Indeed, it was a Sapphic crime of passion (one woman shot and killed her lover in the street in front of the cabaret) that precipated the closure of the Jeu de Dames in the 1980s.[92] But in the vast majority of cases, the biggest threats in these venues did not issue from other women. They came from men.

90. Isselé, interview by author, Paris, Jan. 14, 2018.
91. Marino, interview by author, Paris, Apr. 29, 2013.
92. Marino, interview.

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Sapphic cabarets existed within a larger social world that, while intrigued by them, was often ill at ease with or openly hostile to the behaviors practiced there. The women who worked in and frequented these spaces were subjected to harassment, discrimination, and verbal and physical violence. For cabaret owners, this could take many forms, from outright attacks to neighbors' noise complaints, to more insidious pressures from the police and local officials. Police compelled female managers to hire "in-house security" (the local mafia) and could inundate them with citations for minor infractions that would go unremarked in other establishments, subjecting their businesses to an interminable cycle of legal battles and fines.[93] But as difficult as such harassment was, it did not compare with the dangers posed by male violence. Women could be targeted either for succumbing to the seductions of other women who usurped masculine privilege, or for usurping that privilege themselves. When *entraîneuses* entered sexual relationships with the women they met, they often inadvertently opened both themselves and their partners to harm. Cabaret staff learned to expect such attacks, and were even trained in how to respond. Dan Monnel reports that when she was hired by Lulu de Montmartre (Le Monocle's first manager) to work at L'Heure Bleue in Pigalle in the early 1960s, she received instruction from Lulu directly. When interviewed, Dan told me:

> During my first evening there the boss [Lulu] taught me to use a baton, a broken bottle, or to fight with a chair, holding it by the seat and defending myself with the four legs; and then she taught me how to throw a punch, American-style. I learned all these different self-defense techniques (there were no gym classes for that sort of thing at the time), and I realized that I could have need of them.[94]

Dan's experience is a reminder that women's rejection of gender and sexual norms during these years could often come at tremendous cost.

Conclusion

The Great War's massive demand for and catastrophic effect on male bodies had unexpectedly offered French women—and especially those interested in other women—untold career opportunities, romantic possibilities, and freedom of movement. New experiences, whether in the war zone or on the home front, had ruptured gender roles and multiplied homosocial environments. Mobilized by the impact of unprecedented and often harrowing events, during the interwar era women challenged male prerogatives, gained independence, and pursued

93. Miquel, interview by author, Paris, May 15, 2013.

94. Monnel, "Deuxième partie," 22. Dan elaborated on this story in our interview in Lille, June 9, 2018.

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pleasures that had previously been denied them. The French fascination with *la garçonne*, with sexual experimentation, female emancipation, and masculine travesty then evident testified to an unprecedented period of gender fluidity and play. In a bohemian urban world of music halls, brasseries, *bals*, bars, cabarets, and restaurants, women were seen to be both capable of lust and responsive to masculine (and not just male) seduction. From the interwar years through at least the 1960s, French Sapphic cabarets exploited this vision of female passion and pleasure for financial gain. At the same time, by creating a public space in which female same-sex desire was both modeled and marketed as a binary construct, the Sapphic cabaret educated generations of women in a new form of sexual subjectivity—"butch/femme"—in which female homosexuality was expressed as much through *attraction to* the gendered performance of a same-sex partner, as it was through the gendered performances of subjects themselves.

The role of the *entraîneuse* is particularly enigmatic in this story: it reveals that female masculinity could be learned and imposed, while raising the possibility that some of the cross-dressed women in France's *cabarets féminins* may not have been erotically interested in other women at all. As such, it illustrates how commercial culture played an important part in shaping French Sapphic subjectivities, and especially "butch/femme" roles, not just in the 1930s but for decades to come. Of course, the "fact" of the *entraîneuse* does not negate evidence of the practice of either female masculinity or "butch/femme" sexual systems outside the Sapphic cabarets in these years—what it does do, however, is to complicate our understanding of how, why, and when, these practices became widespread in France. What else does it tell us?

Sapphic cabarets enabled female customers interested in same-sex intimacy to respond to three imperatives: the desire to seduce other women, the desire to evade the male gaze, and the desire—among many women—for group identification (the constitution of community). The commodification of "butch/femme" performance within these spaces facilitated these ends. The results were contradictory: for just as the cabaret helped produce the (binary gendered) female couple as the "self-evident" expression of female same-sex desire, the "butch/femme" and "lesbian" paradigms it promoted also hardened the parameters between normative and nonnormative sexual worlds. As French society turned increasingly repressive, it became ever more difficult for women to engage sexually with other women without the risk of stigmatization that these paradigms, and the labels applied to them, came to imply.

The Vichy years reinforced heteronormativity and augmented homophobia. When Philippe Pétain came to power on a platform promoting *Travail, Famille, Patrie* after France fell to Germany in June 1940, he heralded a resurgence of family values. The French women who had built their lives running the

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Sapphic cabarets of Paris either fled or opened their doors to the Germans. In 1942 homosexuality was, for the first time in 150 years, specifically targeted by the French state when, as noted previously, the collaborationist regime outlawed same-sex acts committed with a partner under the age of twenty-one while leaving the age of heterosexual majority at thirteen.[95] With his gaze set firmly on the "twelve million beautiful babies" required to rebuild the nation, Charles de Gaulle retained the discriminatory language of the Vichy legislation almost verbatim at the war's end.[96] It seems likely that the Brigade Mondaine's decision to augment police surveillance of the *cabarets féminins* in the aftermath of the war was a direct response to such wide-ranging efforts to promote heterosexuality and enforce gender norms.

The police archives demonstrate that following World War II, female masculinity—readily interpreted as inextricable from perverse sexuality—was increasingly vulnerable to surveillance and persecution. This encounter with the law further accelerated the fixing of "lesbian" identities as deviant in the postwar era.[97] But the "butch/femme" binary promoted in the Sapphic cabaret also rendered *feminine* women who desired women newly legible both inside and outside of female sexual subcultures. As female masculinity came under attack—and was targeted in the press and on the streets—"femme" sexuality found new audiences. Here again, the Sapphic cabaret played a role.

While the story is too complex to be told in its entirety here, during the 1950s and 1960s, under the guise of the musical variety show, French state television and radio inadvertently brought a whole host of female cabaret artists—many of whom capitalized on forms of "femme" subjectivity developed in the Sapphic cabarets—into living rooms across the nation. Singers like Suzy Solidor, Colette Mars, Agnès Capri, Dany Dauberson, Mick Micheyl, and the young Nicole Louvier and Gribouille used the artistic and affective license afforded by French TV's variety show genre to contravene heterosexist social norms and challenge the confines of traditional femininity and female desire. Aired during prime time on first just one and then two channels, the many TV and radio broadcasts in which these women appeared—together with the record albums they released—had an immeasurably larger impact on the French public than they would have today.[98] For those capable of decrypting Sapphic subcultural codes, the televised cabaret venue, in particular, was rife with "lesbian"

95. Sibalis, "Homophobia."

96. De Gaulle, quoted in Jackson, *Living in Arcadia*, 43. The heterosexual age of majority was raised to fifteen in 1945.

97. My thanks to Laura Doan for this observation.

98. During the 1950s and 1960s Colette Mars appeared on French TV close to forty times. Dany Dauberson was in more than twenty-seven broadcasts. Gribouille was televised twelve times. Suzy Solidor was either featured or discussed in twenty-five programs. I discuss these shows at length in my forthcoming monograph on lesbian life in modern France.

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inferences in a period heretofore understood as a wasteland for homosexual representability.[99] But if television enabled broad access to nonnormative models of female gender and sexuality long before the emergence of movements for lesbian and gay rights in the 1970s, it was able to do so in part because the binary model that the Sapphic cabaret had helped produce made it possible to see "femme" sexuality. And that "femme" was now visible because she was haunted by the (absent) presence of "a woman dressed like a man."

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99. Mathieu Cadot claims, "In the 1960s, homosexuality was completely nonexistent on French television" ("Visibilité, acceptation, hétérocentrisme," 20). Similar arguments are made in Rollet, *Télévisions et homosexualité*; and Gunther, *Elastic Closet*.

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